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Kentucky Officials Charge Ohioan in Case of the Pilfered Rock

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The border war over Indian Head Rock, the mossy eight-ton lump of sandstone that has divided Ohio and Kentucky, got serious on Thursday.

For months, Kentucky officials have been angry at Steve Shaffer, the Ohio historian who last year raised the boulder from the Kentucky side of the Ohio River and took it to Portsmouth, Ohio, where it now sits in a city garage. On Thursday, a Kentucky grand jury indicted him.

The state is charging Mr. Shaffer, 51, with the removal of an object of antiquity, a felony that carries a sentence of up to five years.

"I obviously need to talk to an attorney," said a surprised Mr. Shaffer, who first heard of the indictment on Thursday morning from a reporter seeking comment. His research and diving work led to the rediscovery of the rock, which had been submerged in the river and largely forgotten for the better part of a century.

Mr. Shaffer said Kentucky officials were seeking revenge for his removal of the rock, whose crude etchings and graffiti have long figured in Portsmouth's local lore. But the rock has lingered on an official Kentucky antiquities list since 1986, and state officials say Mr. Shaffer should have sought a permit from the University of Kentucky's archaeology department to move a protected artifact.

"We're not fighting over a rock," said Cliff Duvall, the state prosecutor who sought the indictment. "I don't think anyone who took it without a license should be rewarded with keeping it."

Reginald Meeks, a state representative from Louisville who last spring sponsored a resolution demanding the return of the rock, said he hoped the indictment would eventually bring the rock back to the river.

"These individuals have been playing fast and loose with the law, and it's caught up with them finally," Mr. Meeks said. "Clearly, there's a different set of values in Kentucky than apparently exist in Portsmouth, Ohio."

Mr. Shaffer called the affair of the rock a "bizarre Appalachian tale" and added, "Every day is a new day with this rock."